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held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



A Reflection on Societal Disabilities in Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*

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Abstract

This paper traces some of the disabilities found in society, which shackles the peaceful life of the inhabitants of the country. It presents how Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist has reflected the ethnic struggles, politics, racism, gender bias and patriarchy in Sri Lankan society. This paper briefly discusses the discomforts of the upper class people involving in politics. In addition, this paper seeks to concentrate on the narrow community where there is gender bias that leads to depression and frustration. The in depth investigation of the novel leads to pinpoint the holes, fissures and sores that weaken the society day by day. Finally, the identities of the characters are questioned and they realised that for their peace, freedom and happiness in the family, society and nation one should sacrifice their desires. The study tries to re-establish the human dignity and human rights of individuals in the society from its disabilities.

Key words: Tradition, Authority, Society, Peace, Freedom, Happiness.

Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist is a reputed writer who concentrates on issues related to ethnic riot, politics, family scandals, gay relations and emancipation. He has recounted his experiences of discomfort during his stay in Sri Lanka in 1920s in his novels. His second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*, is drawn closely from the author's life and personality. It is set among the upper classes in the gracious, repressive and complex world of 1920s Ceylon. It is

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not only about the past of an individual, but also about the history of Sri Lanka, by depicting two people who try to pursue personal happiness by breaking traditional authority without compromising the happiness of others.

The present paper aims at how Selvadurai portrays communal dominance through his characters in *Cinnamon Gardens*. The educated elite class of Ceylonese is highly invested in maintaining a bourgeois respectability that earn them power. The rebellion and the acceptance of them are also focused. Selvadurai's insights into the mechanics of authority highlighted in the novel, *Cinnamon Gardens* are equally sharp and complex. He never ceases to express through the authoritarians' polished and cold appearances to create discomfort in the society. He reads the secrets of the tormented hearts who suffer on the strict norms of traditional authority which is explicated through parental authority. The life of the ordinary poor world, which is beyond the luxury of Cinnamon gardens, is given prominence.

The postcolonial Sri Lanka has moved from colonialism to post-colonial sovereignty, and now to self-assertion. Colonial powers exert the influence of their culture and language on the colonized through both forceful and artful transmission. Tyson has rightly pointed out "The most damaging effects of colonial domination were experienced by non-white populations, whose own cultures were completely or almost completely destroyed as British government officials and British settlers imposed their own language, religion, government, education, codes of behaviour, and definitions of intelligence and beauty on the conquered peoples"(245).

The multi-faceted world of the 1920s Ceylon is seen from the perspective of the powerful upper classes of Colombo's wealthy suburb, Cinnamon Gardens. The most prominent character in this bitter-sweet tale is Annalukshmi, grand-niece of a powerful patriarch Mudaliyar Navaratnam, whose job is to help the British government agents to carry out colonial policy. She is the daughter of Louisa Barnett, a strong-willed matriarch and is forced to raise her daughters alone while her husband enjoys a life with his mistress abroad. Annalukshmi is a highly intelligent, well-educated and a wealthy young woman who knows exactly what she wants to have a good career -- money, independence, beauty, love, sex, but she does not really know how

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to beat the odds to get it all. She fights for independence and in the end, she achieves it in a society where a woman's career is a stigma limited to everything. She wants to be a teacher, but due to the rules of her time and society, she would be forced to relinquish that work if she marries. "The tension between cultures was often, perhaps unavoidably given the state of things, placed within the larger discourse of religious tradition"(Alami 199).

Women face problems of social construct. It is the stereotypes of characteristics of women hold them back more than anything else. However, women backwardness is very clear in Sri Lankan society because of the social issues, problems and many restrictions against women. Women for them are the only medium to keep family happy and healthy. Still after the colonial effect, women have to face problems in their daily life and struggle a lot to establish their career. Postcolonial influence among the Tamil families of Ceylon is hinted at. Annalukshmi's father, Murugasu has run to Malaya, converting himself to a Christian. His wife Louisa has defied the dictates of her family to marry Murugasu. Annalukshmi's qualification as a teacher is considered to be the greatest crime by her mother's relatives, the Barnetts, one of the oldest Christian Tamil families of Ceylon. According to them "A career as a teacher was reserved for those girls who were too poor or too ugly to ever catch a husband. They see it as a deliberate thumbing of her nose at the prospect of marriage"(3, 4). Long established customs, habits and social structures of Ceylon torture her. Her mother tries "to curtail Annalukshi's freedom, to inspire in her an understanding of the necessary restriction that must be placed on a girl to protect her reputation and that of her family's"(4). Having an intention of changing Annalukshmi towards her desire, Louisa allows her daughter to join Teachers College that "responsibility of teaching would finally settle her down"(5).

Negotiating the often-illusory pathways of romantic hopefulness, Annalukshmi ultimately makes some surprisingly mature choices by attempting to free herself from the pressures of society. The emancipation of women arises from the subordinate position they have been accorded for a long time. The empowerment has been felt as a tool to bring about changes in their socioeconomic condition. Emancipation of women needs to begin with their participation in different spheres of life. In order to assert her individuality, she wants to take her

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bicycle, but her mother gets annoyed and says “Don’t talk rubbish, Annalukshmi. You know you can’t go around on a bicycle. . . . Excuse me for pointing out the obvious, but decent, respectable girls don’t ride bicycles”(6, 7). Adding fuel to it, her sister Kumudini says “You can’t. People will say all sorts of things. . . . “Akka, be sensible”, Kumudini said. “Its’s one thing for European ladies to ride bicycles. We can’t”(6-8). As a spirited lady, Annalukshmi determines that she is not going to let herself be stopped by the ridiculous conventions of the society. She convinces herself that it is the fear of authority that makes her mother forbid her and there is no personal repugnance on her part.

Responding to their own mind by breaking the rules would bring happiness for an individual. Annalukshmi experiences the same kind of happiness within in herself. While riding the bicycle to school, her heart filled with elation. She says, “she looked up at the canopy of leaves created by the huge trees on either side of Green Path and she smiled. Her plan had succeeded. . . . She began to pedal faster, blissfully unaware of the looks she was getting from pedestrians and motorists”(17). When days go by, her relatives insist on marriage and that gives her a feeling, “her family sat heavily on her”(330). Annalukshmi feels an unsettled yearning for something, which her life, not confined to a repetition. In the end, she reveals her determination to Balendran, her uncle: “I am considering many possibilities. I might go to Jaffna, I might go somewhere else, perhaps even Malaya with Kumudini . . . Or I might just stay right here. After all, it’s not such a bad life, is it? And I am beginning to meet new people . . . interesting people”(383). Her longingness to escape the traditional authority of arranged marriages and to be an obedient wife are explicated.

Again, Selvadurai lights up the oppression experienced by the constructed norms of masculine authority, through Mudaliyar Navaratnam, an over bearing land owner, who serves as a representative of the king in the days before European domination. Mudaliyar tries to make people live in the constraints and dictates of their culture and tradition. Balendran his second son struggles both on the personal level and on the nation-wide and his role towards sexual transgressions becomes the effective plot in this novel. “The post-colonial is also the

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decolonizing process that rewrites history from other underprivileged sites and contests the European constructions”(Alami 202).

Similarly, V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* focuses the authority of Mrs. Tulsi who is the mother-in-law of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas. Mrs. Tulsi controls all the members of the family. Once she insults Biswas by notifying his poor birth: “What is for you is for you. What is not for you is not for you” (170). She raises her voice when he tries to overcome her. Biswas tells Tulsi, “I curse the day I step into your house. Man, man”(589). She recalls his past pathetic condition, the day he comes to them with no more clothes than he could hang on a nail. Wounded by this he replies “I am giving you notice”. With a thundering voice Tulsi repeats “I am giving you notice” (589). He wants to free from the shackles of oppression and searches for his individuality. Emancipation is an effort taken to acquire economic and social rights. Progressive act can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensity social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation. Finally, out of trials, travails and tribulations, he owns a house to prove his manliness. Even though he has come from a poor background, he never misses the chance of ill-treating Shama, his wife by saying that she has no reason to feel proud of her family because, in his opinion, it is no family at all.

Hence it is pointed out that the characters navigate an uncertain world armed only with insecurities. Balendran loves his wife and his son but continues to struggle with his homosexuality and is thrown into a crisis when his old lover, Richard Howard has come from London to Colombo. By the time he has chosen his marriage and respectability rather than by following Richard Howard, the true love of his life. He searches of his individuality when his father uses his authoritative power over others. In the grand celebration of Navaratnam’s birthday, every one expects Balendran. The members of his family remember a day tinged with sorrow which happened twenty eight years ago. Navaratnam’s elder son, Arulanandan, has stabbed his father due to his father’s resistance to his affair with a low caste woman who works as a servant at Brighton. This incident has forced Mudaliyar to banish his son and the woman to India. Even after many years, the father is stubborn in accepting him. Later when the father comes to know that he is dead his heart melts, and he is willing to get his body. But Arul’s wife



Pakkiam and his son Seelan do not allow anybody to light the funeral pyre. The Mudaliyar is determined to see his beloved son, “even if only in his death, determined to give him the honours he deserved as a member of their family”(244).

Unlike Mudaliyar’s elder son, Balendran is respectful and hence has never expressed his views to his father. He feels sympathy towards his father who belongs to the old breed of statesman and has “come of age at a time when even the mention of self-government would bring the mighty fist of the British Empire down on them”(30). Though Balendran disagrees with the political views of his father, he patiently listens to him out of respect. When his father tells him to receive Richard Howard who comes to Ceylon, Balendran feels as if “his blood thud against his temples”(36). There had been no communication between the friends Richard and Balendran for more than twenty years.

Sri Lanka, despite its cultural Westernization, does not favour the liberating sexual alternates. Balendran recollects how his father destroys his friendship with Richard during the stay in London. Passing of twenty years with his wife and son has filled him with happiness. He has accepted the type of love he had with Richard is part of his nature. “His disposition, like a harsh word spoken, a cruel act done, was regrettably irreversible. Just something he had learnt to live with, a daily impediment, like a pair of spectacles or a badly set fracture”(38).

An insulated world of quiet racism and respectable oppression, where members of the Ceylonese upper class employ the same condescension as their British rulers has been created. The author never ceases to poke through their polished, cold appearances to read the secrets of their tormented hearts. While Selvadurai is far from painting a balanced picture of Colombian society of the twenties, he is not entirely indifferent to the plights of those who are less fortunate and politically oppressed. Through the words of Miss Lawton one comes to know the pathetic situation of Vijith Jayaweera who is a poor clerk at Colombo’s school which is only meant for wealthy young women: “He was fired through no fault of his own”(98). His older brother is a notorious troublemaker and he tries to unionize the estate workers in the Labour Union. Finally a strike is called off and he is put in jail for a month. The innocent Vijith has lost his job. He is not interested in union as he is “A very decent man, really. Supports his widowed mother and two unmarried sisters at great sacrifice to himself”(99).

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The characters, too, are depicted with touching clarity, allowing the readers to glimpse at least briefly at the uglier ordinary world that lies beyond the fragrant hedges of Cinnamon Gardens and even beyond the limits of Colombo, where a faceless, silent majority seems to vegetate in poverty. He is apt in presenting an epigraph from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, “. . . for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs”(np).

The reader cautions that although inequalities are rampant, it is important first to describe how such inequalities play out in relation of one identity to another. Annalukshmi, Balendran and Vijith Jayaweera have come to terms with traditional authority and the sacrifices they have made to create peace to the society is necessary to find the freedom they desperately desire. Annalukshmi wants to be different from the other Sri Lankan Tamil women who lead a conformist life of marriage and household. The clandestine homosexual Balendran consents to lead a hidden life that has ultimately sacrifices self-desire for the good of the family. Hence it is pointed out that the traditional authority, present in *Cinnamon Gardens*, has splintered the family relationships and the peace of an individual and it is very much necessary to be aware of the consequences and change accordingly.

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